

A SHORT DISCUSSION OF PICKETT'S CHARGE AT GETTYSBURG

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The American Civil War as one would see it today in retrospect was in itself a singular struggle. Producing a contest which pitted state against state, brother against brother, and father against son, it principally grew out of attempts to settle, by futile arbitration, age old economic and political problems dating back to pre-Revolution days. Aside from those specific arguments presumably settled by the conflict, the Civil War could further be distinguished for the magnitude and scope of its military operations. Thus the Great Rebellion gave to our history some of the greatest tactical engagements of the 19th century. Of these numerous battles, perhaps the most notable in point of importance to the total effort occurred at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on the first three days of July 1863. Rightfully called the turning point of the war, Gettysburg, however owed a large part of its right to glory to the magnificent but futile charge of Major General George E. Pickett, Confederate States of America and his crack Virginia division.

To obtain the necessary insight into the background surrounding the Confederate decision to attack on the third and last day of the battle, one should briefly review the operations at Gettysburg prior to July 3rd. The disposition of the troops was as follows: General Meade's Union Army of the Potomac was deployed roughly in the form of a huge question mark along a ridge line due south of Gettysburg proper. This chain of small hills, known as Cemetery Ridge, culminated on the north at

Culp's Hill and on the south at Big Round Top. General Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was deployed in the form of a horseshoe with the left arm stretching along a similar ridge called Seminary, directly facing the Union position. The upper bend of the shoe passed through Gettysburg (after July 1) while the right arm stretched past Culp's Hill to the south.
(1.)

On July 1, the opposing forces made their first contact northwest of Gettysburg, where Buford's Union cavalry came upon the advance elements of A.P.Hill's corps. Thus the first day's battle could be summarized as a jockeying operation for positions by the two forces. Upon this first day, the Confederates gained the brief initiative after Ewell's corps drove into and occupied the town in addition to the lower slopes of Culp's Hill. The second day found very fierce engagements occurring at the southern ends of the ridges. Here General Longstreet, one of Lee's most able lieutenants, made a brave effort to dislodge the Union troops from their commanding position on Big Round Top. After the bitterest of fighting, the Confederates were finally thrown back to their original defensive position. The third of July dawned clear and warm. There was no omen of the tremendous carnage which was soon to follow. During the morning, however, there was considerable activity around Culp's Hill where the Confederates were finally dispersed from their positions on the lower slopes. At this stage, the engagement had generally reached a condition of stalemate. General Meade did not seem prone to

1.Gilbert, J. Warren, The Blue and Grey, see map

press an attack. On the other hand General Lee, because of his dwindling supplies, had to conclude the fight immediately or retire. He chose the aggressive move by sending Pickett forward into one of the most famous charges of military history. (2.)

The drama and personal touch connected with the decision to make and execution of this bold attack deserve a large part in any discussion wherein the name of Pickett is mentioned. George Edward Pickett was a Virginian first and foremost. After early schooling in Richmond, however, he journeyed to Quincy Illinois, where he began studying law in the firm of his uncle. Daily he associated with men who tried cases in court with the promising, backwoods attorney, Abraham Lincoln. While in Illinois, Pickett received an appointment to West Point and thus began his military career. He showed no great promise at the Military Academy yet subsequently did manage to graduate at the bottom of his class. It was not until some time later during the Mexican War that Pickett first began to demonstrate his traits as a true military character. He distinguished himself with General Scott's expedition into Mexico and later was praised for his firmness in dealing with the British during that dispute over the boundaries of the Washington territory in 1859. (3)

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Pickett immediately resigned his commission as captain in the 9th United States infantry and traveled all the way back across the continent to give

2. ibid, pp 44-51; 67-88

3. Sandburg, Carl, Abraham Lincoln Vol. II, pp 340-341

his service in the defense of his birth state. Prior to Gettysburg, Pickett as would be expected, showed great promise as a commanding officer. He greatly improved his reputation by his actions particularly in the battles of Seven Pines and Gaines Mill. ⁽⁴⁾

In appearance, Pickett made quite a handsome figure. He is described by historians as a "tall arrow of a man." With his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee, his long ringlets of auburn hair flying behind as he galloped his horse, and his well fitted uniform, he commanded the respect of all who ever witnessed him leading his troops into battle. ⁽⁵⁾

Pickett's charge shortly after noon of the 3rd day at Gettysburg was directed at the center of the Union's defenses along Cemetery ridge. Lee's selection of the actual position to make the thrust was poor, since the men were forced to cross nearly three quarters of a mile of open ground which gradually sloped up to the Union position. The story of the meeting of Pickett and his corps commander, General Longstreet, immediately before the attack provides an added personal touch. Pickett, upon receiving orders to report, approached Longstreet and said, "General shall I advance?" Knowing that it was the only remaining action possible to stave off defeat yet unable to give the command, Longstreet turned his face away and nodded slightly. Pickett, grasping the situation, immediately saluted and said, "I am going to move forward sir." Before he joined his troops, he handed

4. Freeman, D.S., Lee's Lieutenants, pg. 158

5. Sandburg, Carl, op. cit., pg. 340

Longstreet a letter addressed to a girl in Richmond whom he was to marry if he lived. On the back of the envelope, he had written, "If Old Peter's (Longstreet's) nod means death, good-bye, and God bless you little one." Pickett then galloped to the head of his division and the attack was begun. The Confederates broke from the woods along the eastern slopes of Seminary Ridge in perfect formation and stepped out smartly as if on routine drill at the parade ground. It was a tremendous sight, for with Pickett's division and supporting brigades, the force consisted of about 15,000 men. Advancing in three waves, the troops had proceeded for perhaps a hundred yards when all hell broke loose. Hidden Union artillery batteries and the concentrated infantry fire cut the lines to ribbons. But with dogged tenacity the remnant continued to move forward. Probably half the initial force actually reached the Union position and bitter hand to hand fighting ensued until the rebels, their numbers so thoroughly depleted, were completely routed. Pickett, as fate would have it, came back unscathed, but he later wrote his fiance the following: "Your soldier lives and mourns and but for you, he would rather, a million times rather, be back there with his dead to sleep for all time in an unknown grave." The following day Lee began his retreat back to Virginia leaving 23,000 casualties on a field which subsequently proved later to be the high water mark of the Army of the Confederate States of America.⁽⁶⁾

6. Sandburg, Carl, op. cit. pg. 341
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